DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 466 584 IR 021 319

AUTHOR	Gibson, David
TITLE	Collaboration through Online Personal Learning.
PUB DATE	2001-00-00
NOTE	6p.; In WebNet 2001: World Conference on the WWW and Internet Proceedings (Orlando, FL, October 23-27, 2001); see IR 021 310.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Computer Software Development; Computer Uses in Education; *Educational Planning; Educational Theories; Higher Education; *Online Systems; Preservice Teacher Education; Professional Development; *Systems Development; *Technology Uses in Education; World Wide Web
IDENTIFIERS	*Personal Learning Plan; Planners

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the online Personal Learning Planner (PLP) project underway at the National Institute for Community Innovations (NICI) and presents some of the details of the theory and thinking that is guiding its development. The World Wide Web-based software is part of work by NICI to develop tools for enhancing preservice teacher education and supporting increased use of technology, especially in professional development schools. The PLP is designed to assist learners through the processes of: self-assessment of strengths, interests, and aspirations; planning preservice education learning goals and projects; linking goals and projects to valued outcome standards; creating original work and sharing the work with others; receiving high quality feedback for the improvement of work; documenting and validating the achievement of learning goals; and assisting in the selection and preparation of exhibits of learning. The following basic assumptions guide the thinking behind the PLP: face-to-face as a foundation of learning; three bases for planning and action for learning (institutional, professional, and personal priorities); the learning cycle; focus on the learner's work; self-direction and making meaning; and flexible thinking tools. (Contains 14 references.) (MES)

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Collaboration Through Online Personal Learning

David Gibson
National Institute for Community Innovations
Montpelier, Vermont
United States
dgibsonvismt.org

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Abstract: This paper discusses the online Personal Learning Planner project underway at the National Institute for Community Innovations, and presents some of the details of the theory and thinking that is guiding the development. The web-based software is part of work by the National Institute for Community Innovations (NICI at http://nici-mc2.org) to develop tools for enhancing preservice education and supporting increased use of technology, especially in Professional Development Schools.

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Introduction

The online Personal Learning Planner builds a human and machine web-based assistant site that is based on a theory of dialog recently articulated by myself and Anne Friedrichs (Friedrichs, 2000; Friedrchs and Gibson, 2001). The theory of collaborative interaction for learning is consistent with several writers concerned with authenticity, use of technology to create problem-centered learning teams, representation of complex dynamics in educational settings, and online learning. (Carroll, 2000; Gibson, 1999; Gibson & Clarke, 2000; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Stiggins, 1997; Wiggins, 1989, NSDC, 2001).

Friedrichs (2000) discusses four distinct dialogue stages that manifest themselves in the Personal Learning Planning process:

1. Sharing Experience: Listening to own and others' inner speech and natural attitude about a skill or concept.
2. Expressing and Examining Diverse Concepts: Recognizing conflicts; analyzing old and new concepts, models and beliefs; working in one's zone of proximal development.
3. Articulating Applications and Understandings: Practicing new skills; combining old and new concepts; using others' ideas, using scaffolds to renegotiate understandings.
4. Communicating New Powers and Creations: Celebrating effects of critical analysis

The online Personal Learning Planner (PLP) provides a structure within an online working space with private and public access controlled by the learner to enable the above framework to work among a learner and any group of people serving as critical friends and advisors to the learner. With funding from the U.S. Department of Education under the "Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to Use Technology" program (http://www.ed.gov/teachtech/). NICI has developed the first version of the PLP as a "critical friends" online space for future teachers who are assembling portfolios of evidence that they meet the standards required for a teaching license. The PLP is designed to assist learners through the processes of:

Self-assessment of strengths, interests and aspirations
Planning preservice education learning goals and projects
Linking goals and projects to valued outcome standards
Creating original work and sharing the work with others
Receiving high quality feedback for the improvement of their work
Documenting and validating the achievement of learning goals
Assisting in the selection and preparation of exhibits of learning

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Future plans for the PLP include many other learner groups such as K12 students and teachers, trainer-of-trainers programs, leadership programs, and groups as learners, for example, school-based action research teams using the site to develop collaborative products and seeking advice from remote experts to shape and validate the group's work.

Groundwork and Rationale

The lineage of the online Personal Learning Planner comes from two sources. One source is a bold move by a local secondary school community in Montpelier, Vermont that in 1993 placed "individualized educational plans for every student" in their long-term strategic plan. This led, in 1995, to the creation and implementation of a school-wide program to place personal learning at the center of a continuous conversation involving all students, their parents or guardians, and caring adults in a school. Support for the school-based development came from the University of Vermont. As well, the writings of researchers and theorists such as Bentley (1999), Moffat (1998), Friedrichs (2000), Gibson (1999 & 2000), influenced the effort. In addition, early in its development, the concept of the Montpelier "PLP" was picked up by the Regional Laboratory at Brown University, and combined with similar movements and interests in Rhode Island, Maine, Massachusetts and other New England states. In Maine, for example, the concept of personal learning took on a primary role in that state's exciting new proposal for the reform of secondary schools. In other work of the Lab, the theme of personalization became a crucial feature of the secondary reform network in the region, and was tied to the principles of "Breaking Ranks," the reform monograph of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Thus, the concept of personalization of learning as essential to educational reform is well-founded in theory as well as practice.

The other source is the pioneering work of the WEB Project, which makes available web-tools and networked communities for original student work to be shared and critiqued online. The WEB Project successfully brings together working professionals and classroom teachers in support of the improvement of student work by focusing high quality feedback to a learner based on their articulated intentions for their work. The secrets of success of the project are probably many, but it is worth pointing out the learner-centered nature of the online dialogs and the singular focus on creation of original work. Also, the entire sequence of activity in the project only begins if and when a student shares a work-in-progress and asks for specific feedback. These qualities of learner-centeredness, creativity, self-initiative and intellectual focus have been carried forward into the web-based PLP.

The rationale for building a web-based tool focused on the improvement of preservice teacher work has two parts. First, there is a need for feedback to come from a diverse audience, yet preservice and induction programs sometimes have limited resources and structures that produce scant feedback to aspiring teachers. As a result, an aspiring teacher's work evolves in isolation, perpetuating the general conditions of teaching present in most schools today. A web-based professional network can help overcome isolation, but even more important, it can provide the future teacher with high quality information that might not otherwise be available. The advantages of "anytime, anyplace" access to experts is an obvious benefit of a web-tool.

The second rationale is that there is a need for effective documentation of learning beyond paper and pencil formats. Ideally, documentation should be a record of the decisions as well as the validation of the work produced. In small personalized programs, preservice teachers benefit from many interviews and observation/feedback sessions related to their work, but in many programs, that experience is limited to the last few months of preparation. An online personal learning planner can help create a longitudinal multimedia record of growth and change in an aspiring teacher's skills and capabilities

The sources of inspiration and rationale led us to ask "What does preservice teacher work look like?" "What would happen if we could build a site for the improvement of a future teacher's work?" "Could the principles of personalization and helpful feedback in a professional network assist teacher education programs?" The online Personal Learning Plan is a way to pose answers to these kinds of questions.

Critical Components in the Online Personal Learning Plan

One of the first questions often raised is whether online learning of any kind can truly be personal. Isn't person-to-person the most *personal* way to learn? In fact, isn't online work one of the most *impersonal* kinds of interaction there is between humans? I don't wish to argue these points here. Online learning is here to stay. It brings remote resources to the desktop anytime, anyplace. Yes, it is in its infancy. Yes, it lacks many important features needed for rich human communication, but so does writing, film, video, and even talking. Using new communication tools in learning is a matter of integration and balance and its effectiveness depends mightily on the attributes of both the learner and teacher. In spite of these challenges, online learning is growing and evolving at a rapid pace.

The Online PLP promotes a uniquely learner-centered approach to the challenge of integration and balance of technology in learning. The following basic assumptions guide the thinking behind the NICI - PLP.

Face-to-Face as a Foundation of Learning

The online world is an extension of human contact. The Online PLP doesn't and cannot replace face-to-face contact needed for learning; it extends, deepens and enhances personal contact.

Three bases for planning and action for learning

The purposes of learning can be categorized by three domains:
Institutional priorities – our shared community goals
Professional priorities – our scholarly traditions and expectations
Personal priorities – our source of deep meaning

The Learning Cycle

The Online PLP can be a powerful extension and helpmate in the "action research" process of planning, doing, reflecting and consolidating knowledge.

Focus on the learner's work

The learner's productivity and self-efficacy is the ultimate goal of the Online PLP. Work samples are the critical source for evidence of learning, the documentation of progress, and the verification that high standards have been achieved.

Self-Direction and Making Meaning

Learners produce better and are more highly motivated the more they have decision-making power over their learning. Learners gain from posing questions to advisors, and from knowing about, developing and using a variety of learning assets - their strengths, interests, aspirations, community and personal resources. All learning is a matter of making personal meaning out of the alternatives presented in experience.

Flexible Thinking Tools

Learners gain from scaffolding and assistance in stages and types of thinking, for example, divergent thinking, using multiple frameworks and perspectives, and so forth.

Structure and Roles

The online Personal Learning Planner allows all media formats and a multiplicity of linkages among learning goals, projects, and the evidence of attainment of standards of performance. Distinct from electronic portfolios that concentrate on the presentation and storage of completed work, the PLP concentrates on the improvement of work and the documentation of change of work over time.

Three user levels and a server administrator level are provided. Users levels include the Learner, Advisors, and a Program Administrator. The learner is in charge of their PLP. They create or choose goals, link them to standards or other external sources, create work that stands in relationship to the goals, make decisions on when both goals and work will be shared with advisors, and decide when work and goals are to be archived into permanent storage. Learners can make digital collections from their body of completed work. Each collection is presented as a self-contained website in which each work can independently attach reflections, summative evaluation, and new context-setting narrative and graphics.

Advisors are associated with one or more learners. When a learner's goal or work is being shared for

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critique and feedback, the Advisor can discuss, offer direct edits or validate the goal or work as adequate for its purpose. For example, a goal might be validated as appropriate to completion of a secondary teaching license in science; a piece of work might be validated as evidence of achieving a standard of performance linked to one or more goals. The validation process can be formalized with rubrics or left as narrative, and any rubric can be associated with any piece of work's link as evidence. When a group of advisors scores a work using a common rubric, a summative rubric can be built upon completion of the work.

The Program Administrator can review all Learners and Advisor records, add and delete Learners and Advisors, set defaults on the number of advisors that need to agree in order for validation to be complete, create rubrics, create and edit standards, and make other selections associated with program management. The Server Administrator controls the hardware and communication decisions needed for site maintenance and archiving.

PLP as a Team Tool

The use of the PLP as a team tool assumes that agency for a group operates much like it does for an individual, once internal communication and trust within the group has been developed. Outside reviewers can be invited to become project advisors. The PLP allows anonymous or "tagged" contributions by group members to facilitate both group and individual accountability. As a collaborative tool, the PLP facilitates building a group's history as well as a collection of validated work products.

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